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AUTHOR	Wilford, Sara
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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the connection between play and literacy in the early childhood classroom. The paper discusses five literacy goals that can be reached by supporting children's natural inclination toward playful endeavors: (1) developing symbolic processes; (2) fostering language growth; (3) supporting the ability to solve problems; (4) enhancing the motivation or disposition to persist in literacy activities; and (5) facilitating joyful engagement as children speak, listen, read, and write. The paper also examines aspects of early childhood classrooms where play is valued and literacy fostered, focusing on the five goals. Five classroom aspects are discussed: (1) a classroom structure that includes a flexible schedule and sufficient inviting materials to allow opportunities for imaginative play, the development of symbolic processes, and the ensuing effects on literacy development; (2) an environment that encourages literacy growth through fostering phonemic awareness, ever-expanding vocabulary, and meaningful expression; (3) a curriculum that is relevant to children's interests and developmental stages, and rich in problem-solving opportunities; (4) a climate of persistence through the use of self-initiated practice; and (5) celebrating the centrality of story in human lives and the joy that is possible when teachers understand that all aspects of literacy come together in mutual stories. The paper concludes that acknowledging the literacy implications in children's play should be seen as supportive of, rather than in opposition to, the acquisition of literacy skill. (Contains 11 references.) (KB)

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Child Development Institute

Sarah Lawrence College

occasional paper # 2

Spring, 2000

FROM PLAY TO LITERACY:

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Sara Wilford

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by

Sara Wilford

Child Development Institute
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From Play to Literacy:

Implications for the Classroom

There are many perspectives on the connections between play and literacy. Writers and speakers concerned with this topic include professional educators in the area of literacy development, early childhood education specialists, and child development experts. My own interest evolved initially from my years as a first and second grade public school teacher. Later, as director of the Sarah Lawrence Early Childhood Center I wrote a book for parents called **What You Need To Know When Your Child Is Learning To Read** (1999), a book that focuses on variations in timing and domain among children as they seek different entry points into literacy: I wanted to emphasize the fact that parents and other good observers of young children can use the individual differences demonstrated by emergent readers and writers to facilitate literacy development. Most recently, my colleagues at the Sarah Lawrence Child Development Institute and I undertook the co-production of a public television documentary called ***When A Child Pretends*** (1999). The filming took place at our Early Childhood Center, and at Central Park East I Elementary School in East Harlem. All of these experiences have led me to consider the framework of this paper. To clarify, I define ***early childhood*** as spanning birth to age eight, and my definition of ***play*** extends past its pure form as exemplified by imaginative play to include active, child-initiated and adult-facilitated experiences characterized by playfulness and the disposition to investigate.

I believe that there are five distinct literacy goals that can be reached by supporting children's natural inclination towards playful endeavors. To illustrate how these goals may be achieved, I have identified five aspects of early childhood classrooms which value play and playful attitudes and are particularly relevant to fostering children's literacy.

Literacy Goals

Literacy Goal 1 is the development of ***symbolic processes*** as they relate to literacy learning. For instance, the understanding that a prop or a person can symbolize or represent something or someone else in a pretend play drama underpins the realization that a written word stands for a spoken word, and that letters, alone or in combination, can represent sounds.

Literacy Goal 2 is the fostering of ***language growth,*** both semantic and contextual. In their dramas and discussions children expand their vocabularies and elaborate on the meanings of their words and actions so as to be understood by others.

Literacy Goal 3 is ***the ability to problem solve*** in a meaningful, creative context. The problem solving that children engage in as they build a skyscraper or an airport, work through social dilemmas, or at later ages construct a game with rules has direct implications for toleration of trial and error crucial in creative writing, and the prediction and decoding necessary for tackling a challenging text.

Literacy Goal 4 is *the motivation or disposition to persist* in literacy activities. While the term "practice" can imply dry and meaningless rote learning, motivation or the disposition to persist turns practice into pleasureful work such as rereading familiar texts as a bridge to more difficult ones, struggling with a book whose subject or story is of intrinsic interest to the reader, writing an important message such as "Don't knock my building down", and dictating a letter or story. Motivation can even effect handwriting as children strive to make meaningful writing clear for others to read.

Literacy Goal 5 is the *joyful engagement* we desire for our children as they enter all aspects of literacy: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This goal is intimately tied to motivation, and to the centrality of *story* in human lives. It is the "fuel" that feeds a lifelong thirst for literacy and can be seen in children's play with the sounds of language, their ebullience in the creation of dramatic scenarios, and the zest they bring to the choice of a new storybook or writing effort.

With these goals in mind, let us turn to aspects of early childhood classrooms where play is valued and literacy fostered. I have tried to make specific connections between literacy goals and aspects of early childhood classrooms, though some overlapping themes are inevitable.

Classroom Aspects

Classroom Aspect 1 is a ***classroom structure*** that includes ***a flexible schedule*** and ***sufficient inviting materials*** to allow opportunities for imaginative play, the development of symbolic processes, and the ensuing effects on literacy development. Children need unbroken periods of time during which to construct their scenarios, as well as props and materials to support and encourage their dramas. A.A. Milne intuitively understood this as so beautifully described in his children's poem "Nursery Chairs" from **When We Were Very Young**:

> One of the chairs is South America,
> One of the chairs is a ship at sea,
> One is a cage for a great big lion,
> And one is a chair for me.
> .....
> Shall I go off to South America?
> Shall I put out on my ship to sea?
> Or get in my cage and be lions and tigers?
> Or - shall I be only me? (Milne, 1924/1952, pp. 16-17)

Gunther Kress (1997) helps us make connections between the symbolic act of pretending and literacy development in his book **Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy**:

> "....in learning to read and write, children come as thoroughly experienced makers of signs in any medium that is at hand. (There is a) wide range of media which they employ as a matter of course - toys and constructions of various kinds; Lego blocks; cardboard boxes; blankets; chairs; corners of rooms; pens and paper; scissors; paste and paper.....the form and the material of the signs made by children are for them expressive of the meanings which they intend to make.....Say children want to play 'camping' in a room in their house, and they need a 'tent' at that point. Or they want to play 'pirates' and therefore need a 'pirate ship'. A cardboard box provides a container, in which they can sit, it serves as the 'vessel', and the carpet as the 'ocean' " (p.9).

Thus we see that our first literacy goal, the development of symbolic processes, relies heavily on a classroom structure with a flexible schedule and materials that foster imaginative play. In their dramas children expand their capacities to pretend that a prop is something else, relative and useful to the drama. For instance, ...ch cubes may be "meatballs", a crayon may stand for a "shot giver" (or hypodermic needle), and - perhaps too often- the unit block may be a surreptitious gun. The child player may represent another person: a mother, a father, a doctor, a baby, or even a dog. Dramatic play also depends on verbal cues. Although young children may indicate their wishes and intentions by their bodily movements, the words that make up their directives, pleas, and conversational dialogue are key to getting their intentions across. ***The child's understanding that a common object may represent an important prop in her drama, and that a spoken word represents an object or an action, are precursors to understanding that a written word stands for a spoken word, and that letters - alone or in combination - represent sounds.***

Classroom Aspect 2 implies an ***environment*** that encourages literacy growth. This environment fosters phonemic awareness, ever-expanding vocabulary, and meaningful expression which are crucial aspects of our second literacy goal - fostering language growth.

Songs, rhymes, and chants are all opportunities for children to play with the sounds of language and develop phonemic sensitivity. Many of these rhymes and songs are requested by children themselves. For instance, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" contains sets of rhyming words that sound the same - star...are, high...sky - even though they don't look the same in written form. Because the words rhyme, they are predictable: rhyming helps children anticipate the word that will come next in a phrase or a sentence. This is helpful and enjoyable literacy practice for children, giving them a strategy to apply to written language. In the case of "Twinkle, Twinkle" or "Willaby Wallaby Woo, an Elephant Sat on You" teachers would hesitate to transcribe these songs onto experience charts due to the variations in spelling. On the other hand, a song like "Bingo" lends itself perfectly to making connections between singing words and letters, and writing and reading words and letters: an experience chart of this song provides a prominent repeated word - BINGO - and the possibility of pointing out the letters that make up that word - B...I...N...G...O.

Another important part of the environment is a well-stocked classroom library, inviting children to pursue their interests as they work on the conventions

of book reading - turning pages from right to left, scanning pages and lines from left to right and print from top to bottom, or simply following the pictures as they "track" the story. A library of predictable books such as Bill Martin, Jr.'s Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? (1966/1983), along with many delightful Big Books for whole class use, provide opportunities for teachers to invite children's participation as they add to both spoken and written vocabulary, encourage prediction, and point out repeated words and phrases, beginning and ending sounds, and word patterns. In addition to book and story times, meeting times allow children to use words in new and meaningful ways as they share significant ideas and events with each other.

A designated place for play with graphic and written symbols is also an important environmental addition to children's literacy growth. Here they write and draw, cut and paste and staple. They dictate stories or letters, make envelopes, write their names, create important signs for themselves, make meaning as they scribble, and engage in what Lilian Katz frequently refers to as "cross-child talk".

K. William! Are you making a rainbow?

W. Yes! How did you know?

K. Because it's got all the colors in it!

Short Pause

W. What are *you* making?

K. The ABCDEFGs and the numbers. You know, the song

ABCDEFG.....

Clearly, in addition to all of the above opportunities, imaginative play scenes where children can challenge each other's actions, words, and meanings are vitally important. A classroom that invites pretending provides, perhaps, the most fertile ground for language growth, both contextual and semantic.

Classroom Aspect 3 suggests a *curriculum* that is relevant to children's interests and developmental stages, and *rich in problem solving opportunities* necessary for the achievement of our third literacy goal. This might, for the very youngest children, involve the teacher restructuring a specific area of the room. In the following account by early childhood teacher Miriam Mathew(1998) we can see the effect of meaningful room arrangement on early childhood curriculum and the very early literacy behaviors of young three year olds.

"It was spring time and the children had come together as a group....(but) we noticed that (they) paid little attention to the books in the reading center.

I had the hunch that if we made the area around the bookshelf more comfortable and attractive, the children might want to spend more time in the area and connect with the books. By now we knew the interests of the children, so we could select books related to their favorite topics. These were vehicles, animals, rain and rainbows.

....the bookshelf was rearranged with books by Eric Carle, Pat Hutchins, Leo Leoni and David McKee. The subjects of the books were varied so as to appeal to everyone's taste. Ten colorful cushions, and two Saudi Arabian Bedouin seats formed a cozy L-shaped arrangement. A red rug added warmth and definition to the area.

....Structuring the environment in the threes class helped develop a predisposition to literacy activities. This in turn helped the teachers to attend to the affective and cognitive aspects of the children by providing more materials related to reading and writing activities. Children who came regularly to the center got interested in books, stories, and illustrations, and increased their verbal skills....dialogues between children increased social interaction. (The children) got exposure to terms like: author, make-believe story, skipping a page, turning a page, etc.. They thought about open-ended questions, made predictions, presented their comments and listened to others" (pp. 4-10).

Trips and other curricular investigations invite additional opportunities for literacy. Some experiences come directly from the children's spontaneous interests, and may result in the re-creation of an office, a store, or perhaps a restaurant. This in turn can lead to discussing the necessary elements needed to replicate a restaurant, such as drawing the restaurant space on butcher block paper or building 'it with blocks, making the "specials" from written recipes, and creating menus for the customers.

Additional meaningful experiences may be spurred by the interests of teachers. One gifted early childhood teacher explores process no matter which age she is teaching, by choosing to introduce investigations that she feels will demystify natural phenomena frequently taken for granted by children (and often by adults!). She hatches butterflies from baby caterpillars in early fall, takes her class on the adventure from raw apples....to applesauce....to apple pie, or taps a maple tree to gather sap for maple syrup in the spring. The explicit sequencing inherent in these experiences has important implications for the reading process, and this teacher is careful to document what's happening at each stage by mounting photographs that are "read" by the children from left to right and top to bottom.

In another classroom, teacher and children collaborate as the excitement around Halloween builds and skeletons are a high priority. The teacher finds a book illustrating the traditional African American Spiritual "Dry Bones." Children want to see a skeleton, so she responds by cooking a whole fish, which they sample after watching her carefully lift the bone from the body. The teacher then arranges a trip to a biology laboratory, where the lab assistant dissects a fish for them, and then introduces them to the human skeleton. By this time, Halloween costumes are long forgotten, and the children are busily drawing representations of the fish and its organs....while dictating a new chart of questions to investigate.

Meaningful curricular experiences, like these just explored, are literacy come to life through action. They also represent the open-endedness, investigative, and trial-and-error aspects of many activities previously described: children striving to solve social dilemmas in their dramatic play encounters, children eager to discover answers to questions that lead to literate communication and understanding, children problem solving in reading and writing situations where authentic communication replaces "right" and "wrong" judgments.

Classroom Aspect 4 addresses the importance of creating a *climate of persistence.* Without intrinsic motivation and the disposition to persist in literacy activities, the heart of out fourth literacy goal, practice is a dry and useless term. This is not to say that practice is unimportant, only that it need not be meaningless - and therefore boring to the child. To watch the evolution of children's writing is a humbling experience, for just as we adults despair of a name ever being written from left to right, or a sentence from top to bottom (instead of up the page!), we are instructed by children that their logical and playful explorations of print were serious efforts to figure out the *il*logics of printed English. Furthermore, children's serious work to understand how letters and sounds connect, their persistence at the much (and mistakenly) maligned "inventive spelling," can be described as totally logical and motivated practice. Children who grow up in the Netherlands, or those learning Hebrew, for example, receive systematic phonics instruction when learning to read

and write because Dutch and Hebrew are based upon direct sound/symbol correspondence. Becoming literate in English, however, demands a much more flexible and experimental approach, allowing for multiple entry points, with meaningful text as the bait. Sometimes "worksheets" and handwriting exercises are helpful, and even fun: they are only deadly if perceived as the answer to literacy and legibility.

In considering motivation, the basis of self-initiated practice, it is important to acknowledge the place of affect in learning. Kress (1997) views imagination and cognition as "entirely and closely related", adding the following reflection:

> "It seems the case that, as biological beings, we have different dispositions towards the world, differential preferences in relation to our senses. One child might prefer physical three-dimensional representation, another the distanced representation of drawing or writing. Another child might prefer to represent herself or himself through the body, in dance or gesture. Compelling a child to forget his or her preferred mode will have affective consequences" (pp.154-155).

Imaginative play, however, is *every* child's learning mode to some extent, uniting pleasure and inquiry. The importance of the socio-emotional aspects of development for children's success in school have been demonstrated by substantial research, beginning with the High/Scope Perry Preschool Curriculum Study

(Weikart, 1987, pp. 169-188). When we forget to make room for children's differing approaches to literacy learning, their playful natures, and their need for choices of multiple entry points into literacy, we not only limit their chances of success, but severely curtail their motivation. Lilian Katz' emphasis on the importance of children's dispositions and feelings in all learning endeavors supports this premise. (Katz, 1987, 153-154). And we now have the results of a longitudinal study by Rebecca Marcon (1997), entitled *Differential Impact of Preschool Models on Achievement of Inner-City Children* .

"This study examined the effects of early childhood experiences on a group of inner-city children as they approached the transition to junior high school. Data on 249 sixth graders enrolled in 67 schools in a large urban school district were used in the study. The sample, about 62% of which was female, was 96% African American; 76% qualified for subsidized lunch based upon low family income....The results indicated that 6th grade academic achievement was enhanced by early learning experiences that emphasized socioemotional development over academic preparation....While reading appeared to be the area of achievement most broadly affected by kindergarten experiences, boys' overall achievement in 6th grade was consistently higher if kindergarten teachers had nurtured early social development" (pp. 1-10).

Thus, a climate that promotes feeling good about yourself, being recognized for who you are and what you *can* do, has powerful effects on the persistence and motivation so crucial to academic achievement.

Classroom Aspect 5 highlights our final literacy goal, ***celebrating the centrality of story*** in human lives and the ***joy*** that is possible when we as teachers understand that all aspects of literacy learning - speaking, listening, reading, and writing - can come together as a celebration of our mutual stories.

Jerome Bruner (1994) writes, "My life as a student of mind has taught me one incontrovertible lesson. Mind is never free of precommitment....Our precommitment about the nature of a life is that it is a story, some narrative however incoherently put together" (p. 36). Vivian Paley (1990) talks about "reaching children through stories, dictating stories, creating stories, listening to each other's stories" (p. 6). This is why reading to children and hooking them into the wonder of story books is such a powerful impetus for reading. And to use one of Lilian Katz' categories of learning, reading to children will help them acquire the *disposition* to read for themselves. For example, Maurice Sendak's <u>Where The Wild Things Are</u> (1963) is a terrific story which children - especially four year old children - identified with and *demanded*! If left to the adults, who were appalled by the "scary" pictures, this book might not have become one of the enduring children's classics of the 20th century.

Implications for Later Literacy Learning

For those who doubt the continuing connections between play and literacy, I offer inspiration from an alternative public school in East Harlem, New York. At Central Park East I, upper elementary age youngsters are given time to build with blocks, draw and paint, and construct 3-dimensional representations of their ideas as avenues for the expression of thought. The enthusiasm for learning that permeates their classrooms is palpable.

A sixth grader reads to an audience of her peers, gathered to hear and critique a recent story. The story has been written in a form newly chosen by this student, a children's book. Its characters are animals, and include a hero, a heroine in distress, and some life-threatening villains. It is a story about conquering fear. The audience is rapt, as the author reads from the book she will bind herself. Comments are supportive, enthusiastic, and honest. In elaborating on her literacy process, the writer tells them "You know me....I just write and write and write."

From these glimpses of literacy skill among older children who are allowed opportunities for playful expression, we can be renewed in our understanding that literacy is not learned in an isolated place or as a fragmented activity. Perhaps we should be skeptical about the artificial distinctions we draw among the designations of early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence.

In conclusion, acknowledging the literacy implications in children's play should be seen as supportive of, rather than in opposition to, the acquisition of literacy skill. Literacy "benchmarks" have their place as guidelines in assessing skill development. Standardized tests are a "given" in most teachers' and children's lives. But these often arbitrary tools should never force us to abandon our focus on individual children and authentic assessment as we connect our goals with practice. Meaningful literacy teachings and learnings must be woven into the entire fabric of classroom life, irrespective of the ages and backgrounds of the children. Only then will we truly become a nation of readers, writers, and thinkers.

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